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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000692

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SUBJECT: BANGLADESH ARMY CHIEF KEEPS HIS EYE ON THE PRIZE:  
ELECTIONS

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

#### SUMMARY

1. (C) Bangladesh's Army Chief General Moeen Uddin Ahmed reiterated his goal continued to be "free, fair and credible elections" by the end of the year so power could be "handed over to a democratically elected government." In a June 26 meeting with the Ambassador, Moeen noted that the Caretaker Government was discussing with the political parties a handful of ideas, including adjusting the roles of the President and Prime Minister, reviewing Bangladesh's Constitution, and even contemplating a national unity government. Moeen emphasized the political parties and others needed to agree to the post-election scenario, which is why the government was negotiating with the two former Prime Ministers. He vehemently denied any military involvement in choosing candidates for upcoming elections and highlighted local elections as a means of re-distributing power and patronage away from the center. On the topic of counterterrorism, Moeen welcomed opportunities for U.S.-Bangladesh cooperation in improving security at Bangladesh's borders in light of findings from recent border assessments. Moeen struck all the right notes in the meeting and appeared upbeat about his country's prospects in the near and longer term.

#### ELECTIONS ON TRACK

2. (C) Chief of Army Staff General Moeen Uddin Ahmed told the Ambassador the objective of "free, fair and credible elections" and a return to a "democratically-elected government" remained his top priority. He added that meeting this goal had required some re-adjustments, including the decision to negotiate parole options with the two imprisoned former Prime Ministers. He described the dialogue between the Caretaker Government (CTG) and the political parties as critical to hammering out a consensus with regard to the shape of the government that would take power after December elections. Moeen said he did not want to see post-election uncertainty in Bangladesh reminiscent of uncertainty facing Pakistan and Nepal following recent elections there.

3. (C) "Two or three ideas" were being mulled in the political dialogue, Moeen said, including a re-definition of the powers of the President and the Prime Minister. As a result, it was likely Bangladesh's Constitution would need review and revision in the next three years. A national unity government was among the ideas being discussed, Moeen acknowledged in response to a question from the Ambassador,

but Moeen added the government was seeking a consensus solution that would be publicly affirmed by the parties and civil society.

#### NEGOTIATING WITH THE TWO LADIES

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¶4. (C) The ability to move toward a consensus was the key to the government's "re-adjustment" of its policy toward the two former Prime Ministers, Moeen admitted. In seeking a deal with Awami League leader Sheikh Hasina, the government offer of parole on medical grounds required her agreement that corruption trials would continue in her absence. Moeen said the CTG had made the same offer to Begum Khaleda Zia, of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), who had said she would agree to nothing unless her two sons, also in prison on corruption-related charges, were released. Moeen said Zia's younger son, Arafat (Koko) Rahman, definitely would be released. Moeen indicated the government was willing to accept a similar arrangement for Zia's older son, Tarique Rahman, despite the fact he had "taken so much of the nation's resources." According to Moeen, delays on the part of Tarique and his lawyers have slowed the finalization of this deal. Moeen added Tarique's back problems were the result of a serious fall in 2005. (NOTE: There are credible reports that Tarique's back problems were at least exacerbated by torture while in custody. END NOTE.) It appeared Begum Zia would not seek to leave the country for medical treatment, which wasn't surprising to Moeen because she was "not sick."

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#### LOCAL GOVERNANCE AND THE ROLE OF MILITARY

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¶5. (C) Turning to local elections, some of which are scheduled for August 4, Moeen called them critical to decentralizing power and bolstering transparency. Local elections had to be held before national elections in order to ensure Members of Parliament did not interfere in local polls. Empowered local officials would be able to diminish the power Members of Parliament had over their constituencies; in the past MPs were able to divert funds meant for the localities, and they seldom visited the people they were elected to represent. This power vacuum at the local level meant local thugs could take advantage of residents.

¶6. (C) Moeen categorically denied the military was trying to influence which candidates ran for office. He said any such reports were only rumors, adding that "Bangladesh is a nation of rumors." Moeen explained the military was slowly removing itself from playing an active role in government. He said the military would act to ensure a level playing field for all and would speak up on its preferences for the kind of leaders that should run the country but would not seek to put a particular person in a position of leadership.

#### COOPERATION ON IMPROVING BORDER SECURITY

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¶7. (C) The Ambassador reviewed the preliminary findings of recent USG surveys of Bangladesh's border protection procedures, noting a lot of room for improvement and the potential for U.S.-Bangladesh cooperation in this area. Moeen agreed that Bangladesh's borders were very porous and welcomed opportunities for coordination both with the United States and other nations in the region. He said the U.S. could be helpful in terms of equipment and training, while regional cooperation needed to focus on information-sharing.

#### COMMENT

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¶8. (C) Moeen appeared relaxed and optimistic in the meeting.

He continues to talk the talk when it comes to elections and the post-election scenario. However, getting consensus from the political parties on the kinds of changes he discussed will be challenging, to say the least. While Hasina's release brought the Awami League (AL) to the negotiating table, there is no guarantee the AL will endorse the consensus Moeen and the Caretaker Government seek. Meanwhile, a similar deal with Begum Zia and the BNP remains in limbo, as do efforts to reunify the fractured party. Moeen's denial that officials with ties to the military are seeking to influence who runs for office contradicts first-hand reports we've had from party figures that the intelligence services are seeking to identify sympathetic candidates for local elections.

Moriarty